

# Salamis: the battle that saved western civilisation?

Paul Cartledge

In September 480 B.C. some 600 warships under the overall control of Xerxes, Great King of Persia, encountered a combined Greek, mainly Athenian, fleet of some 400 trireme warships in the narrows around the islet of Salamis, not far from Athens. Although the Athenians were outstripped in fighting skill by the Phoenician ships amongst Xerxes' fleet and outnumbered overall, the difficulty of the terrain gave Xerxes little advantage. The Greeks won the battle of Salamis. They credited their stunning win first to the gods (they could all agree on that) and then, among humans (and much more controversially), to the genius of the Athenian Themistocles.

## Speaking truth to power

Was Salamis 'the naval encounter that saved Greece – and Western civilization'? At least one very reputable ancient historian of our own day thinks so. More to the point, that's what one very distinguished ancient historian in antiquity – the original ancient historian, in fact, Herodotus of Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum in Turkey) – also firmly believed. Indeed, his desire to commemorate and celebrate that achievement may well be why he spent his life writing the world's first history book. Here's what he had to say in retrospect (in the Penguin translation of de Sélincourt, as revised by Marincola):

*I find myself compelled to express an opinion which I know most people will object to; nevertheless, as I believe it to be true, I will not suppress it.... Greece was saved by the Athenians ... It was the Athenians who, having chosen that Greece should live and preserve her freedom, roused to battle the other Greek states which had not yet submitted [to Persia]. It was the Athenians who – after the gods – drove back the Persian king [Xerxes].*

All true history is a debate and a dialogue; Herodotus' pioneering exemplar was no exception. His view on which of the Greeks was, or were, most responsible for the defeat of the Persians in the Graeco-Persian Wars of 490–479 B.C. was contro-

The Battle of Salamis is seen as one of the most significant battles of all time. Was it? The historian Herodotus certainly thought so and we look at what he has to say here. We also look at the playwright Aeschylus' *Persians*. By doing so, we will get a stronger sense of why Salamis has its reputation.

*Section of Wilhelm von Kaulbach's Sea battle at Salamis, 1868.*

versial, and he knew it; but he was a fearless advocate of the truth – 'unerringness' he sometimes called it – as he saw it, and as he felt obliged to tell it. The reason for the controversy was that an awful lot of Greeks of his own day – the 440s and 430s – did not want to be reminded of Athens' heroic, possibly civilization-saving feat at the battle of Salamis near Athens in summer 480 B.C. For in the decades following that epoch-making victory the Athenians had developed a navy-based empire of their own; and, though it was, unusually enough, a democratic empire, it was still an empire, and many Greeks did not welcome the loss of freedom that that inevitably entailed, especially when the fight against the invading Persian forces in 480–479, of which the battle of Salamis was a core element, had been crucially a fight in defence of freedom and independence – from the empire of Persia.

So important did Herodotus believe this judgment of his to be that he delivered it – in what we call book 7 of his *Histories* – well before he actually came to give his description of the Battle of Salamis, which he does in book 8. Indeed, he delivered it before he had even got started on describing the course of the mighty Persian expedition by land and sea that took off from what are western Turkey and Lebanon today, in spring 480, to punish and conquer Greece. Besides, before Herodotus got to the massive encounter of hundreds of ships and thousands of men in the Salamis strait, he had first to deal in his narrative with the famous land battle at the pass of Thermopylae (also in book 7). This was a major Persian victory, despite the Spartans' glorious and heroic last stand. And then he still had to describe an indecisive sea-battle near a sanctuary of

Artemis at the northern end of the long island of Euboea, the naval curtain-raiser to Salamis. But it was and is well worth the wait. Herodotus brilliantly conveys both the predictable confusion and the unexpectedness of the outcome of the battle of Salamis, which was a total and literally smashing victory for the Athenians and their Greek allies. He gives special space to the key strategic role played by the Athenian Themistocles and, for the sake of balance, to the manly heroics on the Persian side of the Greek ruler Artemisia, vassal queen of the historian's very own home town of Halicarnassus.

## Exploiting the drama of the situation

At stake in the battle was more than just victory or defeat, but rather the triumph or failure of a way of life. That aspect comes across very clearly in a play that not only includes a poetic description of the sea-fight but also is our earliest surviving Greek tragic drama, the *Persians* by Aeschylus, who had himself participated in the Battle of Marathon a decade earlier and perhaps also fought at Salamis. The drama was performed first at Athens in spring 472 B.C., just seven and a half years after the battle itself. It takes its name from its chorus of elderly Persians and is set at the Persian empire's capital of Susa, far off in Iran, where the Persians react to the terrible news of the Salamis disaster in what Aeschylus represents as a characteristically Persian, that is oriental, way. Not to put too fine a point on it, they weep and wail and caterwaul like a bunch of feeble women rather than grown, adult, Greek-style men. Nor is that the only contrast the Athenian playwright calculatedly draws between the two peoples and their radi-

cally opposed cultures. For these Persians are also shown up as ruled willingly by a sacrilegious madman, Xerxes, and their relationship to him is depicted as that of slaves to an all-powerful master. That was the very opposite of the proper democratic way for fellow-citizens to behave amongst themselves, as the equal citizens of Aeschylus' democratic Athens at least ideally did.

To some today, Aeschylus' drawing of the contrast between Western Athenian Greeks and pathetic Persian Orientals seems at best ethnocentric, but the original contrast is drawn in terms not of race but of what the Greeks called *nomos* or custom. In this respect Herodotus was a firm follower of Aeschylus. Much earlier in his work (book 3), in another famous passage, Herodotus had cited with approval a motto of the Greek lyric poet Pindar, to the effect that 'custom is king of all'. By that, Herodotus meant to convey that the customs and way of life shared in common by any people or ethnic group are normally taken by them to be not just the best possible for them, but the best possible, full stop. For the Persians, therefore, having a single ruler who held absolute power over their nation and territory was their 'way', their traditional time-honoured way of doing politics. But for the Athenians, even after only one generation or so of experiencing it (since 507 B.C.), democracy had come to seem their 'way', their automatically best-case choice of self-governing political life. The Spartans too, who were in overall command of the united Greek resistance to Persia, but were not remotely democrats, entirely agreed that self-government within the framework of the Greek *polis* or citizen-state was hugely preferable to Persian-style imperial monarchy.

*his own fearless brand of ancient history.*

### **Celebrating freedom**

Herodotus recognised and endorsed this Greek cultural trait, indeed celebrated it. His *Histories*, celebrating as they do the collective achievement of Greek freedom, can, therefore, be read as a sort of counterpart in prose to the many praise-poems composed by the poet Pindar on behalf of individual athletic victors at the Olympic and other all-Greek Games. And within Herodotus' moral and political framework of interpretation, the battle of Salamis was represented as the key, the one single event that made the difference, that tipped the balance – in favour of Greek-style political freedom and especially the sort of freedom that made possible his own original, fearless, and by no means nationalistic brand of history-writing.

*Paul is the A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge where he continues to write*